

Catfighting on the Red

By Doug Leier
Photos by Craig Bihrlé

Photo Omitted

Despite its long-standing rank as a world-class river system for producing channel catfish, the Red River of the North still struggles – though it is gaining ground – with an undeserved reputation for muddy banks, stinky bait and ugly fish. Perhaps that is part of the reason why central North Dakota's Missouri River System, along with Devils Lake in the northeast, attract thousands of anglers who otherwise live within casting distance of the Red, but seldom give the river much thought when it comes to a fishing outing.

And that's okay with Dennis Flom, a Harwood, North Dakota catfishing convert who favors no lines at boat ramps, 20-pound "piggys," and rod-and-reel tugs-of-war to which no walleye angler can relate. Unlike some anglers, however, who guard their good fortune like a secretive miser, Flom is an outspoken promoter of the Red River, its catfish resources, and catfishing in general. He scoffs at criticism directed at the Red and its less-than-clear water, preferring to emphasize the river's strengths.

"If people are prepared you can fish the Red River and keep your white shoes white even after hours of fishing," Flom stated. "It's just like fishing the Garrison Dam Tailrace (below Garrison Dam, on the Missouri River). If you're not prepared, you'll be sorry you ever went."

Those who are prepared quickly come to appreciate the varied fishery found in the lackadaisical summer current that forms the border between Minnesota and North Dakota, then flows north into Manitoba, Canada, and eventually reaches Hudson Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. While the Red has its share of trophy

walleye, its main feature is catfish, a resource that draws people from all over the country but is still somewhat disregarded by locals.

Flom is not one of those nose-up locals. He is, in fact, a reformed walleye fisherman. Not just a weekendер either, but a hardcore tournament fisherman who now concentrates on catching catfish and changing the image that catfishing carries in North Dakota. His transformation is so complete that he even operates a sideline business helping other people experience Red River catfishing.

Catching catfish is the easy part. Persuading people to give it a try is the challenge. Once anglers discover how and where to go about it, preconceived notions start to dissolve.

Equipment

Flom uses heavy baitcasting rod-and-reel combinations because every cast has the potential to attract a 10-pound or larger cat that could get tangled in underwater snags. River current also adds resistance. A heavy rod with strong line can help free fish, or just hooks, from snags. When a catfish hits it's time to get serious. Catfish don't run side-to-side like a northern pike, their fight is more perpendicular to the boat. Suffice it to say these "piggys" definitely put up a fight.

Just about any bait-casting reel will work, as long as it has a "line-out" alarm, Flom says. He fills his reels with 30-pound high-tech braided line, and prefers seven-foot medium action or medium-heavy rods; longer length helps cast bait.

In addition to the Red River, North Dakota has other waters where catfish are

abundant, particularly the northern end of Lake Oahe, the western end of Lake Sakakawea, and the Yellowstone and Little Missouri rivers. In these areas catfish are not typically as large as those found in the Red, nor is the water usually fraught with snags. In these situations, people who want to catch catfish can get by with lighter tackle. Flom's other advice, however, is helpful for catfish anglers anywhere in the state.

With heavy tackle, it's easy to assume you can just bulldog a 15-pound catfish to the net, but Flom cautions that landing a catfish takes finesse. "The fish is running downstream with the current and you are trying to bring him back upstream," Flom said. "This combination requires an angler to play with the catfish."

Lee Albright, another Red River catfisherman, who grew up in Peoria, Illinois, a place where catfish have a better reputation, agrees. "Even the smaller ones feel like you're fighting a big lunker," he said.

At the end of the 30-pound line, Flom slips on a 1-3 ounce slip sinker, then ties on a size one barrel swivel. Snap swivels, Flom cautions, sometimes straighten out when subjected to heavy weights – not a good thing when the weight is a 20-pound catfish.

To the barrel swivel, Flom attaches an 18-inch section of 20-pound monofilament line, and then a 4/0 or 6/0 hook. With this set-up, if the hook gets irretrievably snagged, the monofilament line will break, leaving the hook behind but keeping intact the barrel swivel and slip sinker.

Catfishing tackle is not about finesse. Long rods, bait-casting reels and strong line are desirable for fighting heavy fish. Heavy sinkers help hold bait in place in river current. Sturdy, sharp hooks hold strips of fish flesh. Dennis Flom advises leaving the hook tip exposed to the fish, rather than burying the tip in the bait.



The Red River frequently, and sometimes notoriously, rises above its banks. The current's action erodes the shoreline and topples trees into the water. This natural action has continued for centuries, providing needed habitat for the river's fish. Slightly upstream from any wood in the water, as seen in this photo, is a good place to try to catch catfish.

Boat or Bank

Flom prefers fishing the Red River from a boat rather than from shore, though the river has many shoreline access areas (see sidebar for boat ramps and public shorefishing areas) from which anglers can catch catfish. "It's like any fishing," he said, "using a boat I am much more mobile. If the fish aren't biting I don't fish one area too long, 15 minutes without a bite and I am on to my next fishing hole."

No matter where Flom is fishing on the river, his prime location is 20 yards upstream from a deep snag in the form of a tree or trees partially submerged in the water. The snags help break the current and provide an area where fish have to work less just to stay in one place. "If there's wood in the water, there's fish around it," Flom remarked.

From Wahpeton, where the Red forms at the confluence of the Ottertail and Bois de Sioux rivers, north to past Grand Forks, the river has plenty of wood snags. Not only are these snags desirable fishing areas, they are also important habitat for fish in the river.

As the Red continues north, to Drayton and on to the Canadian border, it has fewer and fewer snags. Anglers in these northern stretches, Flom suggests, should look for areas where the current is broken, and then place their baits upstream of, or in the slack area.

Flom typically casts his bait so it rests a few yards upstream from a slack area or object(s) in the water, allowing the bait's scent to drift back to the fish. Since catfish feed by scent, not sight, Flom explained, "Typically catfish will swim up, hit my bait and run downstream with the current."

"The trick is to engage the line immediately," he emphasized. "If you just pick up the rod, catfish will feel the movement and spit the bait out. It's kind of trick at first, but once you get the hang of it you'll be surprised how successful this method is."

Boat fishing, in addition to mobility, provides access to solitude. Dennis loves the solitude of Red River fishing. "I see a number of anglers fishing from shore, but on the water you pretty much have the entire river to yourself," he observed. "Just you and the 'piggy' cats."

While Flom fishes primarily in the section of Red River up and downstream from the mouth of the Sheyenne about seven miles north of Fargo, farther north, in the Grand Forks area, boat traffic is more evident, though seldom congested.



Stink and Other Baits

While “stink” baits – pasty concoctions designed to imitate the smells of dead animal matter – are responsible for thousands of catfish landings across the country each year, you won’t find any on Flom’s custom catfishing pontoon. He prefers fresh bait, and the fresher the better. His favorite is a piece of goldeye, which are plentiful in the Red, though he often uses fresh-cut shrimp as well.

He uses a single pole off the side of his pontoon just to catch goldeye. He masterfully fillets the fish, attaches a strip to the hook, dips it once in the water for good luck, and casts the line. “Just a small cube of fresh goldeye,” he says, “it’s a simple yet effective bait.”

Flom’s knock on stink bait, though it works well in many situations, is that smaller fish just love the smelly paste, and they often swallow the hook while trying to eat it. That can lead to unwanted mortality when it comes to releasing fish.

Nightcrawlers or angleworms are also popular bait. The problem, if you can call it a problem, is that worms attract other types of fish besides catfish, Flom says. These other fish can include walleye, sauger, northern pike, goldeye, crappie and rock bass. Some people like that,

some catfish anglers only want to catch catfish. Choice of bait is up to the angler and what kind of experience he or she is seeking.

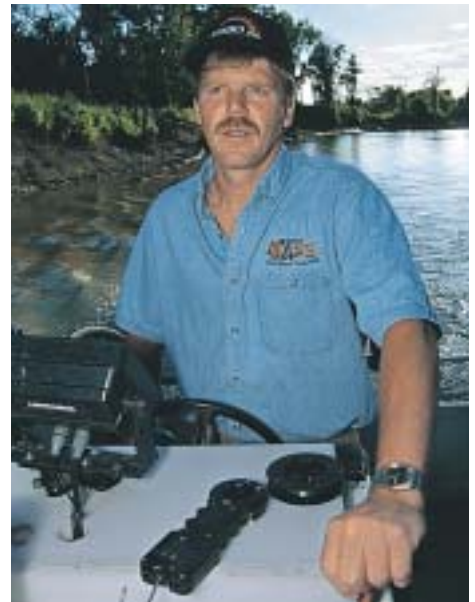
Hot Months

Catfishing on the Red River is typically productive from the time the river recedes to within its normal banks in spring, until about the first of June. June is the toughest month to consistently catch numbers of cats, Flom said. Usually about the first of July the cats start to bite again, and generally continue to bite well until the water temperature starts to drop in the fall.

The best fishing is mid-July through August, Flom said, though he has caught fish all the way into December and even a few through the ice, but the fishing does slow dramatically when the water temperature is falling.

A Typical Night

On a June night last summer, accompanied by a few mosquitoes, I accepted an invitation to join Flom on what he predicted might be a slow evening of catfishing north of Fargo. We landed and released several fish in the 10-pound class and numerous 3-5 pounders. If this is slow, imagine what sort of action is available during the hot months.



Dennis Flom's advice for boating on the Red River? Take it slow and easy until you get familiar with a particular stretch of water.

Wood chucks, bats and broods of baby wood ducks turned the excursion into a complete outdoor adventure. And I didn’t have a speck of mud on my white shoes when we hit the shore.

DOUG LEIER, West Fargo, is a Game and Fish Department outreach biologist.

Rules of the Red

As a border water between North Dakota and Minnesota, the Red River has a few rules that might be different from either state’s inland waters. Because of its special catfish resource, the Red also has special regulations designed to sustain the long-term health of this fishery.

People who want to fish the Red should note the following:

- The daily and possession limit for catfish on the Red River is five, whether an angler has a North Dakota license, a Minnesota license, or both. Only one of those catfish can measure longer than 24 inches.
- People who have either a North Dakota or Minnesota fishing license, resident or nonresident, can launch a boat or fish from shore on either side of the river. Caught fish must be transported to the state in which the angler is licensed via the most convenient route.
- The fishing season for catfish is open year-round.

Photo Omitted

Getting to the Red

The straight-line distance from Wahpeton, North Dakota to the Canadian border is about 200 miles. A boat trip on the Red River that started in Wahpeton and ended at the border would involve about 300 miles, however, as the river adopted a somewhat disoriented course on its journey from south to north.

Most of the land on both sides of the river is privately owned, but bridges and many other public areas and boat ramps provide adequate access. Both the North Dakota Game and Fish Department and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources are working to provide more public access areas.

Access to private land may be available with permission from adjoining landowners. In Minnesota, permission is always necessary before entering private land. In North Dakota, permission is required to enter private land that is posted. The Game and Fish Department recommends that anglers contact landowners for permission to fish on land that is not posted.

Following is a listing of the boat ramps and major public access areas along the Red River, from south to north.

Wahpeton, ND/Breckenridge, MN – Public boat launching site, fishing pier and bank fishing areas located off U.S. Highway 75 to Minnesota Avenue in the city of Breckenridge; west on Minnesota Avenue to the Red River. Concrete boat ramp, parking, and pier are also located in Wells Memorial Park on the south shore of the Ottertail River.

Moorhead, MN – Public boat launching site located off 11th Street North at MB Johnson Park, about one-half mile north of the Crystal Sugar processing plant; parking area for 15-20 car-trailer units and double concrete plank ramp. No dock or services. Bank fishing opportunities also located at: MB Johnson Park, North Dam, Memorial Riverfront Park, Woodlawn Park, Middle Dam, Gooseberry Mound Park, and River Oaks Park (South Dam).

Fargo, ND – Bank fishing opportunities at Fargo water treatment plant, Trollwood Park, Veterans Hospital, El Zagal Park, Tree Foil Park (also called Dike East or Midtown Dam), North Dam, Oak Grove Park, Middle Dam, Lindenwood Park and Lemke Park (South Dam). Boat ramps located at 52nd Avenue South (Convent Landing) and at Midtown Dam above and

below the rock rapids. Canoe access at Lindenwood Park.

Halstad Municipal Park, MN – Bank fishing opportunities and earthen boat ramp one mile west of Minnesota Highway 75 on Minnesota Highway 200 in Halstad. Picnic area with water, shelter and sanitary facilities.

Buxton, ND – Belmont Park east of Buxton has a concrete ramp and bank fishing. Camping, water and toilets are available.

East Grand Forks, MN – Boat ramp located central East Grand Forks off Hill Street at Central Avenue. Full service municipal park with camping, electric and water hook ups, sanitary facilities and picnic area. Parking lot for many vehicles, dock located adjacent to ramp. Lafave Park has good public bank fishing opportunities on the Red River and Red Lake River.

Grand Forks, ND – Concrete ramp and bank fishing area located east of State Mill Road approximately 1.5 miles north of U.S. Highway 2. Bank fishing area downstream of Riverside Dam located east of State Mill road on Red Dot Place.

Bank fishing is also popular at Central and Lincoln parks along the Red River in Grand Forks.

Oslo, MN – Boat launching and bank fishing site on north side of Minnesota Highway 1 bridge near the water tower. Concrete ramp with floating dock, no services, parking for 10-12 car-trailer units.

Drayton, ND – Drayton Dam, two miles north and one-plus miles east of Drayton, has a concrete ramp and a bank fishing area. The city of Drayton has a concrete ramp and a bank fishing area directly east of the city water tower.

Minnesota Highway 175 Crossing – Boat ramp and bank fishing site 10 miles west of Hallock on Minnesota 175 on north side of highway bridge. Concrete plank ramp and parking for 15 car-trailer units; no services.

Pembina, ND – Pembina city campground, located at Pembina and Red river confluence, has a concrete ramp, dock, and a bank fishing area.

(Information adapted from “Red River Angler’s Guide” produced by ND Game and Fish and Minnesota DNR.)

Photo Omitted